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A JOURNEY TO THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON: METAPHYSICAL AND MORAL ASPECTS OF EVIL IN PLATO'S *PHILEBUS*

James L. Wood

This paper explores the place of evil in Plato's thought through the lens of the *Philebus*. I show that the concept of evil in this dialogue is in broad agreement with the classic Christian position which accents metaphysically its privative and derivative character and morally its rebellious and self-oriented character. The entryway into the issue is 29d9–e1, where a “power of dissolution” is proposed in addition and opposition to the power of generation and mixture, and then quickly rejected. Such a power would be both metaphysically and ethically subversive, or in short, evil. Plato appears to suppress the possibility of evil, but in fact, he relocates the power of dissolution within the unlimited *genos* in order to show its necessary subordination to and dependence on the limiting and causal principles within generated beings. Evil, on a metaphysical level, is subject to good. On an ethical level, however, the possibility of subversion remains and is exemplified in the dialogue in the radical hedonism of *Philebus*. After showing how hedonism manifests the power of dissolution in human life, I conclude by remarking the ultimate practical proof towards which this dialogue, and others, points in defense of its claims.

I

This paper addresses the question of evil in Plato. Before beginning, however, it would be well to head off a certain misconception that might stand in the way of an open consideration of this question. The misconception is that evil is a specifically religious concept that cannot properly be discussed in a secular philosophical context. To the extent that evil is bound up with a supernatural being or beings, the objection must be granted. Only within a specific religious tradition, such as Christianity, can supernatural evil be broached. But the concept of evil is hardly exhausted by its expression in religious language, for as the history of Christian thought itself indicates, this very language is philosophically significant. We find in Christian teaching, for instance, the notion of evil as a power both opposed to God and ultimately subordinate to him. Evil necessarily lacks its own independent reality, its own *archē*, since God is the source of all being and goodness. Evil is for this reason often conceived of as a sort of lack



or privation of being and goodness.¹ At the same time, in its opposition to God, evil is seen as rebellious and destructive, and so is not merely the absence of good but the willful turning away from it.² On this conception, in short, evil subverts and destroys being and goodness, even as it remains ultimately subordinate to them and to their source in God.

It is my contention that a similar conception of evil can be found in Plato: that is, the concept of a power opposed to the good yet dependent upon it, and operative on both a metaphysical and a moral level.³ In Plato scholarship we do indeed find some significant discussion of metaphysical evil on the one hand, most of it concentrated on the *Timaeus*, the *Laws*, and the *Statesman* (in that order); and of moral evil on the other, mostly focusing on one or another of the discussions of virtue and vice in the so-called early and middle dialogues.⁴ The present discussion differs from most of those discussions in three important respects: Firstly, I indicate explicitly at the outset the concept of evil at issue and its relevance to the tradition of religious thought in which it is more widely and more usually considered;

¹St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.9: "Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil.'" Cf. Aquinas (I.Q. xiv, a. 10; Q. xlix, a. 3; Contra Gentiles, III, ix, x).

²Augustine: "For when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked" (Ibid., XII.6). Cf. *Confessions* VII: [III] 5 and [XVI] 22. Cf. Aquinas (I-II, Q. lxxiii, a. 6; II-II, Q. x, a. 2; I-II, Q. ix, a. 3).

³My intention here is not primarily to argue that this conception of evil is *correct*, though the arguments I advance in explicating Plato's remarks may be persuasive in this direction; rather, I have the more modest objective of revealing and interpreting the conception of evil that I have located in Plato's thought, and of showing its compatibility with the important strain of Christian thought sketched out above.

⁴Some classic papers include C. M. Chilcott, "The Platonic Theory of Evil," *The Classical Quarterly* 17:1 (Jan. 1923), pp. 27–31; H. B. Hoffleit, "An Un-Platonic Theory of Evil in Plato," *The American Journal of Philology* 58:1 (1937), pp. 45–58; Gregory Vlastos, "The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaios*," *The Classical Quarterly* 33:2 (Apr. 1939), pp. 71–83; E. R. Dodds, "Plato and the Irrational," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 65 (1945), pp. 16–25; M. Meldrum, "Plato and the *Archē Kakōn*," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 70 (1950), pp. 65–74; and H. Cherniss, "The Sources of Evil According to Plato," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98 (1954), pp. 23–30. More recent articles include: R. Mohr (among his other related papers), "The Sources of Evil Problem and the Principle of Motion Doctrine in Plato," *Apeiron* 14 (June 1980), pp. 41–56; G. R. Carone, "Teleology and Evil in *Laws* 10," *The Review of Metaphysics* 48.2 (Dec. 1994), pp. 275–298; A. Nightengale, "Plato on the Origins of Evil," *Ancient Philosophy* 16.1 (Spring 1996), pp. 65–91; and S. R. Charles, "Plato's Devil," in *Earth's Abominations: Philosophical Studies of Evil*, ed. D. Haybron (New York: Rodopi NY, 2002), pp. 89–104. Classic monographs with significant discussion of the issue include: U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Platon II* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919); A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928); F. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Kegan Paul, 1937); W. C. Green, *Moirā: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944); H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944); and Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste II: Le Dieu Cosmique* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1949).

secondly, I consider both metaphysical and moral evil in their essential interrelatedness; and thirdly, I restrict my attention to a single dialogue, and one usually neglected by the dominant scholarship: the *Philebus*.⁵ In spite of this relative neglect, the *Philebus* is, as I will show, particularly apt for an investigation of evil in Plato, given both its thematic focus on the good and its metaphysical sophistication. That is, Plato's more explicit articulation of the good in the *Philebus* more clearly reveals the nature of its underlying opposite, just as brighter sunlight casts a darker shadow.⁶ As this way of putting things suggests, however, evil makes its appearance in the *Philebus* in a less than direct fashion, and seems, at least initially, to be quite subversive of Plato's intentions.⁷

In the following section of the paper (II) I analyze the passage in the *Philebus* in which Plato first raises and then rejects the possibility of an independent *archē* of evil, conceived as a negative cause or power of dissolution. In the course of this analysis I examine what is at stake in the acceptance or rejection of such a principle, reveal its disruptive implications for Plato's metaphysical and ethical system in the *Philebus*, and conclude with a brief critical examination of a system which *does* accept a principle of dissolution: the philosophy of Empedocles. In the next section (III) I argue that Plato recognizes the disruptive implications described in the first section, but rather than rejecting evil altogether, instead incorporates it into his system within the *apeiron*: the unlimited, the power of indeterminacy. I shall show through Plato's analysis of the *apeiron* that what is unlimited is always necessarily subject to what is limited, and through the limit is subordinated to the cause of mixture. Consequently, an independent power or principle of evil is shown to be a metaphysical impossibility. In the penultimate section (IV) I turn to the moral dimension of evil in the hedonism of *Philebus*, represented as the unbridled pursuit of self-satiation at the expense of others. In a moral sense, it is the way of life based on the unlimited that we can most properly call evil, in contrast to the good life presented (and represented) by Socrates: the philosophical

⁵This focus requires perhaps no special justification, but it bears noting that many of the tensions and inconsistencies between dialogues that furnish much of the grist for the scholarly mill of Plato studies arise from failure to take adequately into consideration differences in dialogical context. For this reason I take it as an indispensable hermeneutical principle in interpreting Plato not to shift focus from one dialogue to another without giving due attention to dialogical context. Hence, and because the present paper is fully occupied with the analysis of a single dialogue, I must postpone substantial consideration of cross-dialogical tensions or parallels on this topic to a later occasion.

⁶Cf. John McGinley: "The doctrine of the good in *Philebus*, much like the light side of the moon, may require a dark side—unanalyzed and perhaps unanalyzable—as its condition of possibility"; "The Doctrine of the Good in *Philebus*," *Apeiron* 11 (1977), p. 34.

⁷The consideration of metaphysical evil is generally quite subtle in Plato, including in the *Timaeus* and the *Statesman*, and indeed it is only in *Laws* X that Plato *explicitly* raises, and ultimately dismisses, the possibility of a principle of evil operative on a cosmic level in opposition to the good. Plato does not, however, provide the metaphysical resources in the *Laws* to justify this dismissal as satisfactorily as he does in the *Philebus*.

life. But as I conclude (V), while the difference between these lives can be expressed in theoretical and metaphysical terms, ultimately the contest must be decided practically, not theoretically. That is, the worth and validity of the good life is finally justified by actually living it.

II

Toward the middle of the *Philebus*, just after Socrates has introduced the four basic genera or forms (*genē, eidē*) into which all existing things are to be divided—the *unlimited*, the *limit*, the *mixture* of these two, and the *cause* of the mixture—a brief, peculiar, and usually unremarked exchange occurs with his principle conversation partner, Protarchus. Protarchus asks Socrates, “Won’t you also be in need of a fifth, a power of dissolution?” Socrates replies, “Perhaps. But not, I think, at present anyway. But if a need should arise, I presume you will bear with me as I go in search of a fifth” (23d9–e1).⁸ The subject of a possible fifth *genos* is then dropped and is not raised again for the rest of the dialogue.

The hasty reader will no doubt pass over this exchange without giving it a second thought, or even a first—as, indeed, most commentators on the dialogue have done. After all, there are all sorts of peculiar passages to be found in Plato’s dialogues, and this does not appear at first sight to be among the more important or interesting of them. If, however, we linger over the passage for a moment, its peculiarity might begin to grow on us, and questions begin to arise: “Just why did Plato write these lines anyway? What was his purpose? Did he have a purpose? Do they mean anything or not?” Of course, the question of authorial intent is fraught with difficulty, especially in the case of Plato, who never states his intentions or positions directly. The question of meaning is scarcely less problematic.

But that this passage is at least important can hardly be questioned once we have attended sufficiently to the implications of what Protarchus suggests here: a “power of dissolution.” Let us consider briefly what this power signifies in the context of the ongoing discussion. Socrates has just introduced as his fourth⁹ *genos* the cause of the mixture of the limit with the unlimited. This cause mixes, combines, brings together. Protarchus’ proposed power would therefore be just the opposite: a cause that dissolves, separates, takes apart. But just what is it that is brought together by the cause Socrates accepts and that would be taken apart by the cause he rejects? What is the mixture? Plato gives us a number of clues. Socrates first confirms that “certain generations result in each case” when limited and unlimited elements are combined (25e3–4), goes on to define mixture as “genesis into being” (26d8), practically identifies mixture with generated being at 27a11 and 27b8–9, and emphasizes the breadth of this *genos*, first by telling Protarchus that “the extent of the generation of the third kind has confused” him (26c8–9), and then by declaring that the mixture

⁸All translations are my own, from *Platonis Opera*, vol. II, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹It is fourth in the order in which he introduces them, but first in rank and power; cf. 27a8–9, where Socrates subordinates the other three principles to the cause by calling them “slaves to the cause in generation.”

includes "all things that are unlimited and bounded by the limit" (27d9). In short, mixture is the principle of existence itself; to be is nothing other than to be a mixture of the limit and the unlimited.¹⁰ The cause of mixture is a generative cause; it is the cause of coming into being. Its opposite must then be a destructive cause; it is the cause of passing out of being.

Moreover, the order of the four *genē* is not just supposed to account for the existence of beings, but also for their goodness. This normative significance can be seen at once from the dialogical context in which the four *genē* are considered, and it is confirmed both by Socrates' analysis of the mixture and by his later discussion of the idea of the good. Socrates introduces the four *genē* in the first place to aid Protarchus and himself in their investigation of the nature of the good life, which they have agreed to be a mixture of pleasure and intellect (*nous*), and specifically to help them discover which of these two will have primacy within the mixed life by being the "cause" of it (22c6–e2). After going through his four *genē* in some detail, Socrates explicitly subsumes the mixed life under the mixed *genos*, intellect under the causal *genos*, and pleasure under the unlimited *genos* (27c3–31b1). The nature of the good life is thus determined by its reflection, indeed its embodiment, of the order of the four *genē*, while this order itself expresses, in turn, the nature of the good. Socrates makes the goodness of his cosmic order most apparent in discussing the mixture, where he speaks of "symmetry and harmony" as resulting from the combination of limited and unlimited elements and proceeds to give only examples of good mixtures (cf. 25e1–26c2). As Socrates goes on later to explain, the goodness of anything lies in its measured and harmonious nature. More precisely, a mixture is good when it manifests symmetry, beauty, and truth—the three aspects under which, Socrates suggests, we can capture the idea of the good (65a1–5).¹¹ Lacking these things, he adds, a mixture is no longer even really a mixture, but rather "an unblended mishmash, the sort of thing which really becomes a disaster to whatever has it" (64e1–3). Finally, the idea of the good in its three aspects becomes the basis of Socrates' final ordering of goods, both cosmic and human, at the end of the dialogue (66a4–c10). The upshot is that the goodness of human beings depends upon the extent to which they render themselves measured in accordance with the cosmic order of the good, which requires

¹⁰As Kenneth Sayre has observed, the explicitness and frequency with which Plato links the mixture to the genesis of beings makes the refusal of certain commentators (e.g., Striker and Gosling) to recognize the inclusion of generated beings (i.e., particulars) within the *genos* of mixture downright baffling (cf. Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology: A Riddle Resolved* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], pp. 147–148). The additional question of whether or in what sense "forms" are generated from the limit and unlimited is addressed at length (and answered in the affirmative) by Sayre, but will not concern us here.

¹¹Gadamer emphasizes the lack of an ontological gulf between the cosmic and human good, as between the formal and particular generally in this dialogue: "'the good,' which is at the same time 'the beautiful,' does not exist somewhere apart for itself and in itself, somewhere 'beyond.' Rather, it exists in everything that we recognize as a beautiful mixture . . . [in] the structure of the mixed itself." (Cf. Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic and Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986], p. 115.)

that they use the power of *nous* to limit the power of the *apeiron* in their sensual nature.

By now it should be apparent that the four-fold cosmic order is both ontologically and ethically significant.¹² The mixture is the manifestation of being and goodness, and so its cause is the power responsible for generating being and goodness. Plato even associates the cosmic cause with a cosmic *nous*, calling it a "craftsman" (*dēmiourgoun*) which he links to "the nature of Zeus," all of which lends a quasi-theological imprimatur to the dominance of the generative cause (cf. 26e–27b; 28a–30e). But this very dominance serves to highlight the problem of the proposed fifth *genos*. For the more ontological and ethical significance Plato gives the cause of mixture, the more subversive and destructive the rejected cause of dissolution becomes. If Plato were to accept a causal principle that is the very opposite of the generative cause, he would import Manichean dualism into the heart of his metaphysics and relativity into the heart of his ethics. There would no longer be one first principle but two, the one set directly in opposition to the other, so that mixture would no longer be any more fundamental than dissolution, being than nonbeing, good than evil.¹³ Consequently, the "mixed" life that Socrates grounds on the generation of mixture would be no more metaphysically justified than a life grounded on the dissolution of mixture. Why, then, should one live the life Socrates advocates as good in this dialogue (and many others) rather than, say, the hedonistic life Philebus advocates?

From these considerations it seems that the cause of dissolution is a direct threat to Plato's ontological schema, and by extension to the conception of the good life based on it. It is the power that opposes and destroys both existence and goodness. And as the power opposed to the good, which indeed works to destroy it, what better name could we give it than the power of evil? The question thus arises: Is Plato in this brief passage

¹²Many commentators fail to note the normative significance of this section, and the connections between the metaphysical and ethical discussions in the *Philebus* generally. Perhaps the best example of this approach is Gisela Striker's *Peras und Apeiron*, which labels the metaphysical sections "excursions" with no real connection to the ethical theme stated at the dialogue's beginning, then proceeds to ignore the latter in the ensuing analysis (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 9–10. As I hope even this brief review has shown, such an approach simply does not do justice to the way Plato sets up and makes use of the 23b ff. section.

¹³It should be noted that at least one commentator has seen the proposed fifth principle as a possible force for good rather than evil. Ficino suggests that it would "separate what's better from what's worse for the sake of the perfection of the better." He finds an expression of this division in the *Phaedo*, in the division of soul from body, which he sees as necessary for the ultimate happiness of the soul; Marsilio Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, trans. Michael J. B. Allen (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), bk. 2, chap. 2, p. 420. So far as this dialogue is concerned, the closest analogue might be the analyses of pleasure and intellect, which are supposed to extract their impure parts so that only the pure might remain to be incorporated into the mixed life at the dialogue's end. Nevertheless, this sort of separation in the terms of this dialogue should be understood rather as progress toward the proper mixture of pleasure and intellect characteristic of our good than as the dissolution at odds with the mixed *genos*.

both suggesting and then suppressing the possibility of evil as a metaphysical and moral reality?¹⁴

Before addressing this question directly, some points of clarification are in order. In the first place, the question is not whether processes of dissolution and destruction occur in nature, for no one disputes that Plato accepts the reality of such processes, at least so far as the material world is concerned.¹⁵ The question, rather, is what the metaphysical status of such processes is: Shall we posit, on the basis of observing the interconnection and serial succession of combination and dissolution, generation and destruction, life and death in nature, that there is a cause of dissolution and destruction equal to and in opposition to a cause of mixture and generation?¹⁶ And again, given the correlation Plato makes between mixture and goodness here, shall we be forced to concede that goodness is no more "natural" than wickedness, that there is no more metaphysical justification for the one than the other?

This being the issue at stake, it would not be satisfactory to conclude that Plato simply rejects the cause of dissolution because he finds it irrelevant to his present purposes. That is, one might suppose that Plato entertains and then dismisses the thought of the fifth (1) to show his willingness to use different metaphysical principles to different purposes, as

¹⁴One might take a Derridean approach to the passage in question, to the effect that the fifth is one of those marginal elements, like the *khōra* in *Timaeus* and the *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*, which serves to disrupt and destabilize the dominant Platonist agenda. I would suggest, however, that Plato is just too obvious in his introduction and retraction of the fifth for us to accuse him reasonably of not knowing what he is doing. In other words, whatever his agenda is (which hopefully the ensuing will help illuminate), it is hermeneutically safer to suppose that it includes, rather than is disrupted by, this passage and its implications. (Cf. J. Derrida, "Khora" in *On the Name*, ed. T. Dutoit, trans. D. Wood, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) and "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); for a good critique of Derrida's approach to Plato, see Drew Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), chap. 2.)

¹⁵A few commentators have suggested that Plato rejects the proposed fifth because he means to restrict dissolution in this dialogue to human intellectual activity, specifically in the practice of dialectic. (See esp. Seth Benardete, *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993], pp. 140–141; cf. Oliver Letwin, "Interpreting the *Philebus*," *Phronesis* 26 [1981], p. 188; and C. Ritter, "Bemerkungen zur *Philebos*," *Philologos* 15 [1903], p. 527.) But not only is this a rather speculative interpretation, it seems to imply either that Plato does deny the reality of degenerative processes beyond the human mind or that Plato is bracketing the fifth in the manner I go on to describe and reject.

¹⁶Gadamer claims that division is just as much a function of cause as unification, which would imply that one and the same cause is responsible for both generative and destructive processes in nature. For him the passage in question has no greater significance than being "a malicious question from [Socrates'] opponent" (*Plato's Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations Relating to the Philebus*, trans. Robert Wallace [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991], p. 130). He does not explore this issue further, however, or consider the problems that would result from incorporating two directly opposing activities in one and the same principle.

he apparently does in different dialogues, and (2) to show that his purpose in this dialogue is to clarify the nature of good mixtures, which requires a generative, not a destructive cause.¹⁷ Plato appears quite pragmatic and flexible under this interpretation—but at the cost of metaphysical integrity: for by choosing just these four principles, which just so happen to support the elevation of intellect over pleasure, Plato could be accused of skewing the ethical outcome through an arbitrary and biased metaphysics. At the very least, to avoid this charge he would have to say that every valid metaphysics must achieve compatible ethical results in the end.¹⁸ But because the result in question depends upon the supremacy of a constructive cause, the one metaphysical scheme that he could not accept is one in which a destructive cause rivals the constructive cause.

Such a metaphysical scheme, in fact, already existed as a historical possibility for Plato, in the philosophy of Empedocles.¹⁹ As a final clarification by way of contrast, then, it may be useful to consider briefly some problems posed by Empedocles' metaphysics. In his system Friendship and Strife, the principles of combination and dissolution respectively, are forever at war, and nature as a whole partakes in the cyclical movement between them. As Aristotle points out, Friendship and Strife seem to be principles of Good and Evil, though Empedocles never quite uses this language (*Metaphysics* A, 985a4–10). Empedocles' remarks on ethics sometimes suggest a connection to his metaphysical system (cf., e.g., Diels-Kranz, 31B115), but without any attempt to explain how acting in accordance with Friendship is any more metaphysically justified than acting in accordance with Strife. In addition, as I will go on to show, such a metaphysics harbors an internal incoherence, which for now I will describe simply as an inability to explain the perpetual operation and progressive development of generative activity in nature. In Empedocles' system this inability is implicitly acknowledged in his need to privilege the operation of one of his two principles over an immense period of time to account for the existence, growth, and evolution of living beings.²⁰ Furthermore, as

¹⁷As Cynthia Hampton puts it, "The four kinds turn out to be the classifications that are particularly useful in the analysis of pleasure and knowledge and the roles they play in the good life." (*Pleasure, Knowledge, and Being* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1990], p. 41). Reginald Hackforth takes a similar line (*Plato's Examination of Pleasure* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1972], pp. 38, 44).

¹⁸Hampton suggests the possibility of diverging yet ultimately compatible metaphysical schemata with the following remark: "[D]ivision is made here—as it is in other later dialogues—according to the Forms (23C), but within this general context, the divisions are made in accordance with what is appropriate to the subject at hand" (*PKB*, p. 40). But she does not consider the particular problem posed by the proposed and rejected fifth *genos*.

¹⁹Hackforth speculates that Plato in fact has Empedocles in mind when he has Protarchus introduce the cause of dissolution (*PEP*, p. 44).

²⁰One might object that Plato seems to posit something similar in the *Statesman* myth, but even without a detailed consideration of this myth we can observe that its very status as *myth* prevents us without further ado from reading into it a literally intended cosmology. Moreover, as I indicated in the above note on hermeneutical principle (n. 5), the purpose of this myth must be considered from the dialogical context of the *Statesman*, including its overt political theme, the identity

Aristotle observed, Empedocles falls into additional difficulties because he sometimes makes Friendship responsible for dissolution and Strife for mixing (*Metaphysics* A, 985a21–9)—a problem, we might add, that Anaxagoras seems to have as well, by having his moving cause, *Nous*, generate beings through separation. But this problem is not just one of inconsistency, for it betrays a need to subordinate destructive to generative activity to make any sense out of the observed facts of nature.

Let us now return to the *Philebus*. As I have noted, what is at stake here is not whether there is dissolution, destruction, and death in nature generally, but whether dissolving, destructive power ought to be granted a metaphysical status comparable to constructive, generative power. Plato, it seems, rejects this possibility in rejecting the proposed fifth *genos*, because he wants to preserve the supremacy of constructive cause in his metaphysical and ethical system. But how then does he account for destructive processes in nature and human nature? And how can he include but subordinate such processes without being accused of metaphysical bias? The answer, which I will elaborate in the next section, is that he includes the power of dissolution within his system, subordinated to the mixing cause, in the unlimited *genos*, and that this subordination is justified because of the metaphysical incoherence which would result if the unlimited held a comparable or superior status to the cause.

III

That the unlimited is responsible for dissolution can be seen in the basic description of it as the power of “more and less,” “strongly and gently,” “greater and smaller,” as well as simply “the excessive” (24a9, 24c5, 24e7–25a1), which “does not allow an end (*telos*) to come to be” (24b1), which “conceals” and “causes to vanish” both the “so much” and the “measured” (24c5–d2), and which “is always moving forward and does not remain” (24d4–5). As the power which perpetually veers between polar opposites, which is characterized by constant flux and the absence of any *telos*, the unlimited is apparently opposed to the stable, determinate existence of anything at all. Wherever it asserts itself, it displaces²¹ quantity and measure, “causing” them “to vanish,” whatever that might mean; and it is “productive” only of the “greater and smaller.” This causal language leaves no doubt that the unlimited is at odds with the limiting and mixing

and agenda of its primary interlocutor (an Eleatic), as well as the use to which this myth is actually put in the dialogue.

²¹As Socrates puts it, these are displaced from the *khōra*, the “seat” or “territory” of the unlimited, which suggests not only a turf war between the limit and unlimited but also a sense in which the unlimited might be prior to the limit—at least insofar as a limit and end can come to be only where something was unlimited or relatively unlimited beforehand. Here it begins to become evident how the unlimited and the *khōra* in the *Timaeus* share more than a passing resemblance, for it would seem that the unlimited in the *Philebus*, like the *khōra* in the *Timaeus*, serves to give place to what comes to be, while being itself, necessarily, in no place at all, and for that reason not *having* being or *being* being in any normal or easily understandable sense itself.

cause, for it either prevents that power from achieving its generative and ordering end or destroys the fruits of its labors.

Perhaps, then, Plato simply dismisses the fifth *genos* because its function is fully subsumed by the unlimited.²² Perhaps the *apeiron* is the principle of evil for Plato. Aristotle at least suggests as much in the *Metaphysics* (A, 988a8–17).²³ The exchange with Protarchus is perhaps designed to alert the reader to the emergence of the very power just suggested a few lines later, only under a different aspect. But the unlimited cannot fully replace the proposed principle without the reemergence of the problems already noted with respect to that principle. The very ease with which we have identified the unlimited as the reincarnation of the suppressed causal power calls into question whether Plato really accomplishes anything by replacing the one principle with the other.

This concern need only be momentary, however. As strong as the language is that Socrates uses in his analysis of the *apeiron* to describe its opposition to the quantity, measure, and stability of determinate being, we must remember that he had explicitly abstracted the unlimited from the other three *genē* at the outset of the investigation in order to determine its particular nature and power through his previously established method of dialectical analysis (cf. 23e3–6, 16c ff.). Ironically, however, this very abstraction prevents a full account of the unlimited, because it leaves unexplained the possibility and evident actuality of the juxtaposition and interaction of the unlimited and the limit in all existing things.

What, then, does Plato accomplish by this analysis of an independent unlimited? Among other things, he shows that an independent unlimited is nothing more than an abstraction, which pushed to its logical limits in fact ends in self-defeat. To see this, let us first look more closely at how Socrates describes the manifestation of the power of the unlimited. He describes the activity of the “more and less” in terms of other, more determinate pairs of opposites: “hotter and colder,” “wetter and drier,” and so on (cf. 24a7–8, 25c8–11). Specifically, the unlimited is said to “dwell” in them, and by its presence there to prevent a limit and *telos* from coming to

²²Damaskios says simply that “It would be better [than positing a fifth *genos*] to make the One the cause of all things, Limit of unification, Infinitude of differentiation, and the Mixture of what participates in both”; *Lectures on the Philebus*, trans. L. G. Westerink (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1982), p. 50. In other words, by causing differentiation, the unlimited performs (better) the function that the fifth would perform.

²³In the same context Aristotle points to a kinship between Platonic and Pythagorean views, and it is indeed unquestionable that Plato inherits the concepts of *peras* and *apeiron* from the Pythagoreans, even if he puts them to his own uses. In turn, one may note the influence of this interpretation of the *apeiron* in Plato on the later tradition, particularly on Plotinus and the neo-Platonists (cf. esp. Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8), and through them in turn on Augustine and later Christian thought (see notes 1 and 2 above). (Cf. A. Barker, C. Huffman, and J. Gosling in particular on Plato’s Pythagoreanism in the *Philebus*: Barker, “Plato’s *Philebus*: The Numbering of a Unity,” *Apeiron* 29:4 [1996], pp. 143–164; Huffman, “The Philolaic Method: The Pythagoreanism Behind the *Philebus*” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy VI: Before Plato*, ed. Anthony Preus [Albany: SUNY Press, 2001]; Gosling, *Plato: Philebus* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975].)

be. What is the status of these contraries? The greater concreteness of "hotter and colder" already indicates that it is more than merely unlimited, for in addition to expressing the power of "more and less," it expresses temperature, and is to that extent something determinate.²⁴ Of course, "hotter and colder" is still quite indeterminate, or better, is merely an abstraction from the range of actual temperatures, for there is no such thing as "hotter and colder" considered simply in itself. "Hotter and colder" becomes meaningful only in relation to a degree of temperature (which is a quantity and measurement), as the hotter or colder relation of all other possible or actual degrees of temperature to that degree. Simply put, this or any other concrete expression of the power of the unlimited already implies its necessary relation to a limit.²⁵

As for the "more and less" itself, stripped of its embodiment in temperature or some other continuous field, we cannot even say what it is. It merely indicates indeterminacy, boundlessness, endlessness, and so on, which are in themselves absolutely empty and unintelligible. The indeterminate as such is literally nothing, no-thing, and no-thing-ness, the essence and power of nonbeing. Nevertheless, this very negative mode of expression indicates its necessary relation to something determinate, indeed to anything determinate. To speak about "more and less" immediately raises the question: "more and less of what"? One can have more or less of some particular thing, but "more and less" as such is relative to any and all determinate things, and thus to determinacy as such.²⁶ Determinacy brings an end to the "more and less" by introducing some specific amount, and thus reveals the more and less itself to be the pure possibility of anything and everything existing according to some greater or lesser degree.

Hence, this situation described by Socrates, in which the power of the unlimited resists all quantity and measure, is not possible in an absolute sense; the impossibility of an independent unlimited implies the impossibility of its absolute antithesis to the limit. Simply put, pure unlimitedness

²⁴Doubtless for this very reason such pairs were a staple of the Presocratic philosophies, for they seem both primordial and at the same time concrete enough to serve as the material elements of actual beings. Anaximander, who posited the unlimited as his single cosmological principle and speculated that the unlimited somehow gives rise to hot and cold, and through them to all other things, is perhaps the most relevant example of this way of thinking (cf. Diels-Kranz, 12B1/A9, A10).

²⁵This is true whether one considers comparative opposites, such as "hotter and colder," or their non-comparative roots, such as "hot and cold." The latter seem less indeterminate because they do not seem to imply a relation to a determinate measure according to which comparison can take place; but they are nevertheless still quite indeterminate, as we can see by merely asking the question: "How hot?" "Hot" implies something that is hot, and for something to be hot is for it to manifest a particular degree of temperature. Of course, even to call a particular degree of temperature "hot" can raise the question, "relative to what?" or "whom?"; which indicates that relativity and indeterminacy are an indelible feature of such sensual continua as "hot and cold," "wet and dry," and most relevantly, "pleasure and pain."

²⁶Even the words themselves convey the intrinsic interconnection of these aspects of reality: *a-peiria* is the negation or absence of *peras*.

or an absolutely unlimited *genos* is impossible because it is indistinguishable from pure nothingness, and pure nothingness cannot be a *genos* or a *dunamis*; it cannot be anything at all. To be unlimited is already and necessarily to be in relation to some limit, and therefore to be also limited, which means the unlimited is always already mixed and as such subject to the mixing cause. Limit and unlimited always exist together within the particular beings of the world, and indeed, collectively constitute their being and nature through their generative interaction.²⁷ To understand how they both conflict and cooperate, oppose and yet depend upon the existence of the other, we must view their opposition from the perspective of their creative coexistence. In the light of that context, the essential relationship between the limit and the unlimited is revealed as neither conflict nor cooperation between equals but as hierarchical harmony—an association of unequal partners—whose interaction is marked by the overcoming of the one by the other. The limitless flux of indeterminacy is transformed in the presence of the limit and cause into the possibility of progress, motion toward an end, productive change.

To say this is not to deny the reality of destructive change; what the superiority of the limiting cause over the unlimited implies is the subordination of destruction to construction, nonbeing to being. Destruction brings to an end the being of particular determinate beings, but never of *being* (cf. Aristotle, *Physics* I), which moves ever onwards in the generation of new beings, indeed out of the very ashes of destruction, the remains of which always retain the residue of being and the seeds of regeneration. The unlimited can never be fully free of the limit—and vice-versa; but far from implying the equivalence of constructive and destructive causes, this situation rather reveals that everything is always already mixed, and hence that constructive cause is always at work as the predominant principle of the cosmic order. The unlimited, in short, can only function *within* the cosmic order of the four *genē*; it cannot overcome this order and become the dominant principle of another order—an order which indeed would be the very antithesis of order, of cosmos, for the rule of the unlimited would be nothing less than the collapse of cosmos into chaos, being into nothingness.

IV

But just because the unlimited can never become the dominant principle of the cosmic order does not mean that it cannot be in some sense *taken* as dominant by human beings; this is an important difference between the cosmic and the human dimensions of evil. Here we must return to the

²⁷As Gadamer puts it, the unlimited is an “existential moment” (*Seinsmoment*), along with the limit, in every being (*Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, p. 137). Striker argues against this position, but as these considerations show, we must reject her view, that “das *apeiron* muss als eine Klasse aufgefasst werden, deren Elemente in der wahrnehmbaren Welt vorkommende Einzeldinge sind” (*Peras und Apeiron*, p. 50). The supposition that, as a *genos*, the *apeiron* must be instantiated by objects in the world, holds only if we recognize that it is instantiated as a “moment” or aspect of being, or more precisely of the process of being, the “*genesis eis ousian*” (26d8) brought about by the generative cause.

moral level to reapply the metaphysical considerations raised above, just as Plato does in the dialogue. So far as human life is concerned, what matters most about the unlimited is the way one comports oneself towards it and the other three cosmic principles. Specifically, what matters is how one comports oneself toward the sensual instantiation of the unlimited in pleasure and pain. To take pleasure as the good and live accordingly, as Philebus does, is in effect to elevate the unlimited over the limit in oneself, so far as that is possible. The eventual result of living this way, as Socrates argues in the dialogue, is nothing less than the ruination of one's own humanity, the perversion of one's own nature. This is the manifestation of evil in a human being.²⁸

But how, one might wonder, is it even possible to elevate the unlimited over the limit in oneself, since the dominance of the unlimited has been shown to be metaphysically impossible? To this we must recall first that the dominance of the unlimited is only impossible in an absolute sense; on a local level and to a limited degree the unlimited triumphs all the time in the degeneration and death of particular beings. Such dissolution, however, is only ever partial and relative, and the progress of generation continues inexorably. So far as human beings are concerned, however, a more important consideration is at work. Here we should recall the link Socrates establishes between the intellect and the cause at the end of his discussion of the four *genē*: it is through the intellect that we instantiate and express the power of the generative and ordering cause in our soul. So just as the cause limits the unlimited in nature generally, the human intellect must accomplish this task by bringing order to the flux of sensuality in human nature. But by the very fact that it is a *task* for us we see a crucial difference between the cosmic and human levels of causality: it is *possible* for us to neglect or reject the task of limiting the unlimited in ourselves, and so to degenerate psychically to a state of disorder and depravity. Physically, of course, the hedonist can live to a ripe old age so long as his indulgences do not destroy his health; we are, as bodies, no more or less subject to the generative and degenerative processes of nature than anything else. But to the extent that we are, as rational creatures, placed in control of ourselves, we are capable of furthering or diminishing the accomplishment of mixture in our souls, and so of allowing or preventing the triumph of the unlimited in the domain of our own lives.²⁹ It is on the moral, or better, existential level, not the metaphysical level, that such triumph becomes possible, which is to say, on the local level that is our own

²⁸Robert Bury points to the nature of evil as a deviation from the form applicable to human beings through the specification of limit to their nature (and so, by implication, a turn to the unlimited in their nature): "In so far as its own qualification or quantification exceeds or falls short of this *normal* *eidōs*, just in so far as is the individual member [of the species] evil and untrue. The ultimate meaning of unreality, evil, falsehood is just *abnormality*, or departure from the type"; Robert Gregg Bury, *The Philebus of Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), p. xliv.

²⁹Here we can see in what sense the condition for the possibility of evil and the condition for the possibility of freedom are one and the same: the instantiation of cosmic causal power in the intellect grants human beings, alone of all creatures in nature, the possibility to achieve or to fail to achieve their own good.

being, to the extent that one lives in a way that actively (if not consciously) promotes the unlimited.

At this point a closer examination of this way of life is in order.³⁰ In the *Philebus* Plato portrays wicked living particularly in terms of hedonism, or from the standpoint of one's attitude towards pleasure and pain. What is most significant about hedonism in this dialogue is that it is not merely a theoretical position on the nature of the good. When we consider its characterization in a dialogue shaped around a contest over the nature of the good life, we can see that hedonism represents a way of life based on the pursuit of pleasure without qualification. Philebus accepts no restrictions whatsoever on the kinds or amounts of pleasure he is allowed to enjoy, for there is no standard to which he subjects himself other than pleasure itself, or in other words, whatever happens to please him.³¹ The result, as we might expect, is the predominance of the most intense pleasures, which, as Socrates shows and common experience confirms, tend to be centered in the body (cf. 44e7–45a6 ff.). Philebus, whose name literally means "Youth-Lover," is hardly a sophisticated hedonist, for the "higher" pleasures depend upon a commitment to things other than physical sensation—such as artistic or natural beauty, effort and achievement in one's work, the wellbeing of other people, learning and knowledge, and of course philosophy.³² One can certainly pursue those things knowing the pleasures that sometimes follow from them, but one cannot pursue them just for the sake of their pleasures.³³ Receiving pleasure from philosophy, for example, requires that one actually care about philosophy, or in other words, that one care about it for reasons other than the pleasurable sensations that the activity of learning provides.³⁴ To the extent that

³⁰I discuss the hedonism of the *Philebus* further, and from different perspectives, in my "Comedy, Malice, and Philosophy," *Ancient Philosophy* 27.1 (Spring 2007), pp. 77–94, and "Politics and Dialogue in the *Philebus*," *Interpretation* 34 (2007), pp. 109–128. In the former I trace its connection to the psychological disposition (and impure pleasure) of malice or envy (*phthonos*) and the anti-philosophical activity of eristic, and in the latter I give a fuller characterization of Philebus himself and his dialogical and political significance as a radical hedonist.

³¹The extreme nature of Philebus's position is apparent more in his inflexible and dogmatic attitude than in anything he actually says, for he says very little; but Protarchus' defense of his position makes clear Philebus's unwillingness to accept anything but pleasure as a good in itself. See especially 12d7–13c2.

³²The pleasures of learning are the dominant example of the pure pleasures that Socrates goes on to discuss and explicitly welcome into the good life, in contrast to his heavily qualified admission of lesser, bodily pleasures. I will discuss the pure pleasures at greater length momentarily.

³³For an argument along these lines against the theory of psychological egoism see Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. George Sher (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), pp. 4–14.

³⁴That is, the activity is logically prior to the sensation it furnishes, just as the valuing of the activity is psychologically prior to the valuing of the pleasure it furnishes. This is true of all pleasures, but one key difference between basic bodily pleasures and the higher psychic pleasures is that a much greater cultivation of oneself and commitment to standards outside oneself is necessary to appreciate the latter. In other words, it is necessary to subordinate and discipline oneself, and

one eliminates every other possible good but pleasure, one orients oneself away from everything in the world that can serve as a source of value and towards oneself as the locus of brute sensation.

It is hedonism in this sense that represents moral evil in this dialogue.³⁵ If this language sounds too strong, that is perhaps because we tend to associate evil with its most destructive and horrific manifestations. But evil need not manifest itself in terrible atrocities and widespread destruction; that is simply an extreme example of what can result when power is paired with a basic disregard for anything beyond one's own self-satisfaction.³⁶ Put in the terms of the *Republic*, a tyrannical soul need not be an actual tyrant; it need only be dominated by a perverted eros—perverted, namely, away from the transcendent good and towards itself (cf. *Republic* Book IX). In the *Philebus* Plato does not use political terminology, but the substantial identity of the tyrannical and hedonistic types is indicated in the *Republic* and should not be overlooked here: despite their differences, both begin with self-oriented eros, and both end in self-destructive misery. Both, in other words, are evil, because both the tyrannical and the hedonistic souls, when understood as the radical exemplars of their type, refuse the task of ordering themselves in accordance with any limit or standard outside themselves, and so give themselves over to dominance by the unlimited flux of pleasure and pain within them—a dominance represented by the *erōs tyrannos* of the *Republic* (572e–573c).

But if we can now see in what sense hedonism represents moral evil in the *Philebus*, as we saw in the previous section in what sense the unlimited represents metaphysical evil, it may still be unclear how the two senses of evil fit together, or in other words just how pleasure and pain embody the unlimited in human nature. Socrates establishes a connection between them following his analysis of the four *genē* by asking Philebus, “Do pleasure and pain have a limit, or are they among the things that receive the more and less?” (27e5–6). Philebus blithely answers, “Yes, it is among the things that receive the more, Socrates, for pleasure would not

so to demote oneself as an authoritative source of value, in order to acquire the capacity to enjoy the higher pleasures in the first place.

³⁵It is worth noting that the words *kakos* and *ponēria* (and their variants) occur most often in the *Philebus* in the discussions of pleasure and pain, and particularly in ways that bear on the hedonist and his way of life: for example, describing the pleasures (false or impure) that the hedonist tends to experience or favor (13b–c, 37d, 40b, 41a, 45e, 46a) or the pains to which he most of all is subject (28a, 44a), or again the vicious and ignorant character of his soul (26b, 39e, 48b, c, 49a, d).

³⁶Indeed, the predominant impression we have of Philebus from his brief activity in the dialogue is of a foolish young man, who merely declares his stubborn refusal to yield to Socrates at the beginning (12b7–8) and after a few interjections and snide remarks seems to doze off for the rest of the subsequent discussion. But it is precisely Philebus's dogmatism in defense of a crude and extreme hedonism and his apparent immunity to philosophical persuasion that makes him representative of the radical alternative to the Socratic good life in this dialogue. Should he live out his life in accordance with the principles he espouses or which are attributed to him, the consequence would be the ruination of his soul, if not his body, and the ruination of any others who fall under his influence or who become instruments of his pleasure.

be everything good if it were not unlimited in nature, both in plenty and in increase" (27e7–9). To the extent that the unlimited is an essential part of the four-fold order of being and of the good, Philebus is in fact quite right, and he touches on an important aspect of goodness: its infinite supremacy in itself, and its unbounded potential for increase in us.³⁷ But as Socrates' reply reveals, Philebus is only half right: the potential for infinite increase is not a sufficient condition of goodness because it pertains just as much to badness. Goodness and badness are both expressions of the unlimited; pleasure as representative of "the more" is countered by pain as representative of "the less."

Philebus believes that he can enjoy pleasure without limit, and he welcomes its association with the unlimited for this reason. But pleasure as unlimited cannot simply increase without limit, because increase is motion in a single direction, and directed motion requires direction—that is, order, intentionality, end-directed causal power, and in short, the limiting cause. When Socrates says, "it is necessary for us to seek something else than the nature of the unlimited which furnishes some share of good to pleasures" (28a1–3), this is exactly what he means: the goodness of pleasure is directly dependent on its subordination to limiting cause and its integration within the hierarchy of the four-fold cosmic order. To the extent that it is without limit (and it can never be *completely* without limit), pleasure manifests the ceaseless flux of the unlimited: its increase must be countered by decrease, its forward motion of "more" by the backward motion of "less." In other words, pleasure, insofar as it is unlimited, is necessarily countered by pain.

Socrates goes on to describe the circularity of pleasurable and painful motions in terms of the perpetual emptying and filling typified by biological processes: "When harmony dissolves in us as living creatures, the dissolution of nature occurs together with the generation of pains at that time . . . while pleasure arises when it returns to its own nature and is harmonized again" (31d4–10). He cites hunger and thirst as examples, noting that in both cases pain attends the emptying and pleasure the replenishment of our bodily "natures." There is no end to such processes—outside of death—and hence there can be no final attainment of pleasure and harmony in them or banishment of dissolution and pains. To dedicate oneself to the bodily pleasures is to make the basis of one's happiness the endless pursuit of fleeting satiations, the satisfaction and intensity of which are not only brief but are also perpetually preceded and followed by the dissatisfaction and intensity of opposing sensations of pain. To use Plato's memorable metaphor, living in this way is like trying to fill a "leaky jar":

³⁷Ficino emphasizes both the positive and negative aspects of the unlimited, though in a rather different way. The first, he says, is divine, and is "itself the limit of all things." The second is "universal matter," that which seeks and needs the limiting *provided* by the divine infinity (*The Philebus Commentary*, bk. 2, chap. 1, pp. 384–388). We can see here an instance of the Christian revaluation of the *apeiron*, generally regarded in a negative light by the Pythagoreans and their followers, by incorporating it into the nature of God; but if I am right about the necessary place of the unlimited in the cosmic order of the good, that redemption is already underway in Plato.

one labors at it constantly and achieves nothing in the end (cf. *Gorgias* 494a–b, *Republic* 586b).

By making himself into a “leaky jar,” the hedonist welcomes the power of dissolution into his life and gives himself over to its power. It is of course true that every biological entity is subject to the sort of processes Socrates cites, and as such is also a victim of the power of dissolution, which in the end will win the battle with regeneration and result in death. This is no more true of the hedonist than of anyone else. Nevertheless, the hedonist is a “leaky jar” in not just a physical but also a spiritual sense, because he orients his entire soul and being toward pleasurable satiation and so defines himself according to its unlimited nature. It is not the physical pleasures themselves that are problematic; they are not bad or evil, but are in fact necessary to life. Rather, it is the hedonist’s elevation of them to the principal place in his life that corrupts both them and the hedonist, and the hedonist most of all in soul, not body. Through this elevation the hedonist elevates himself into the sole source of value even as he effectively diminishes himself and his value into nothing more than the empty site of satiations, a vehicle of consumption, a slave to the tyranny of his own eros.

One might conclude from this analysis that Plato means to condemn pleasure and advocate an ascetic way of life to counter the degenerative effects of the bodily fluctuations. Certainly he does say some things in some places that might encourage this conclusion (especially in the *Phaedo*). But in the *Philebus*, at least, he does nothing of the sort. Rather, pleasure is included in the good life, which is defined explicitly as a life composed of both pleasure and intellect. The pleasure in the mixed life, however, is pleasure subordinated to the limiting power of intellect; it is mixed, measured pleasure rather than unlimited pleasure. This means on the one hand that the enjoyment of physical pleasures is moderated by the rule of reason, just as we see in the *Republic* and elsewhere in Plato. The references to “necessary pleasures” and pleasures rendered compatible with “health, moderation, and virtue” toward the end of the dialogue capture the place of these pleasures in the mixed life: they are to be enjoyed, as necessary to life, so far as is compatible with virtue and the health of soul and body (cf. *Philebus* 62e, 63e; *Republic* 558d, 581e).³⁸

On the other hand, the enjoyment of other pleasures, the so-called pure pleasures, is positively encouraged, and indeed directly linked to the pursuit of the good life (cf. 63e). As one can see especially from the preeminent example of these pleasures, the pleasures of learning, the activity of the intellect itself is being tied to the experience of pleasurable sensation. In other words, the good life is typified by pleasurable intellectual activity, the highest manifestation of which is philosophy. As Socrates points out, these pleasures are not qualified by an accompanying degenerative motion;

³⁸There is admittedly a significant ambiguity in the text on this point, given the apparent absence of all but the pure pleasures in the final catalogue of goods (cf. 66a–d). Now is not the time to discuss this problem, but as is evident from the above analysis, my position is that Plato does mean to include the “necessary” and “moderate” pleasures in the good life—specifically, he does so in the sixth ranking, left open and empty to signify the transition from dialectic and dialogue to life, into which the formal articulations of the good must finally be applied or “mixed.”

there is no pain that belongs to them the way hunger is bound to eating (52a–b). Of course it may be true that intellectual (and philosophical) inquiry involves struggles and setbacks, the pains of exertion and occasional frustration and disappointment, and it is undeniable that Socrates leaves such experiences entirely out of account here. But the more important point is that such painful experiences are not cyclically bound to their corresponding pleasures, which means that increase without limit is possible in this sphere. The pleasure of philosophy is inherently limitless, or at least limited only by human mortality and cognitive deficiency, because there is no endpoint beyond which degeneration sets in, no point of final satiation. Gaining wisdom does not imply its subsequent loss—and where loss does occur, through forgetfulness, it does not involve pain. In short, the pleasures of philosophy provide direct proof of the possibility of a transformed and redeemed unlimited, from indeterminate flux to positive progression, the infinite increase in goodness experienced directly by the philosopher in pleasurable sensation.

V

This proof, however, is not and cannot be completed in the dialogue because it refers beyond the dialogue to lived experience, and so to life itself. This ultimately practical thrust of the dialogue is signaled in various ways, particularly by its explicit orientation around a contest over the good life, its lack of a formal beginning or ending, and the injunction given in the description of dialectic that its formal articulations be “released into the unlimited” at their conclusion (16e1–2).³⁹ The final proof of the goodness or badness of a way of life must be realized in the experience of living it. However compelling the analysis of the cosmic order and the unlimited might be in proving the metaphysical groundlessness and self-destructiveness of a hedonistic way of life, it would be decisively refuted if one simply pointed to a good and happy Philebian hedonist—or better, if one were oneself such a hedonist. If Socrates has given us good reasons to believe that his way of life is superior to Philebus’s, still, he would be the first to say that we should not simply accept him at his word, but should put his words to the test—by living philosophically. We have profoundly misunderstood the life of Socrates, and Plato’s point in persistently representing that life in his dialogues, if we suppose that Socrates or Plato only means to persuade us intellectually of certain doctrines. Here, too, we find a significant parallel to Christianity, and to the life of *its* founder: both Platonism and Christianity are ultimately practical in their orientation.

Still, it may fairly be asked at the end whether the arguments of Socrates or Plato have been successful in their own right. Why should we believe that reality is fundamentally organized according to four principles, of which the cause is the chief and the unlimited the least, that the dynamic

³⁹There is also Socrates’ remark towards the end of the dialogue comparing their *logos* to a “bodiless cosmos ruling harmoniously over an ensouled body” (64b). Just as the cosmic order is meant to be applied to our own embodied existence, unifying the metaphysical and moral dimensions of the dialogue, the dialogue itself as an articulation of that order and its bearing on our life is meant to be applied to the interlocutor’s—and the reader’s—own life.

hierarchy of these principles in turn determines the nature of our good, and that hedonism is the best expression of the radical alternative of living in accordance with this order, of the evil as opposed to the good life? In fact, as evidenced both by the multifaceted nature of the dialogues as a whole and by certain clues within this dialogue,⁴⁰ Plato probably would not wish us to accept as metaphysical dogma what he says in every detail in this or in any dialogue. Nevertheless, so far as the central issues at stake are concerned—whether pleasure or intellect is a better basis for the good life, and correlatively whether the nature of the good is better grounded on the rational ordering power represented by cause or the fluctuating sensuality represented by the unlimited—Plato provides good reasons, explicated herein, for thinking that a theory of any form that elevates what is represented by the unlimited over what is represented by the limiting cause will ultimately be logically and metaphysically incoherent, as well as a very poor basis for life—and indeed the basis of an evil life.

In any case, it is precisely because evil as a concept verges on the incoherent and nebulous that any theoretical account will find itself severely limited in its capacity to rationally articulate it. Moreover, goodness resists analysis and definition too, in spite of being evil's opposite, and in spite of the much greater attention it receives in Plato's writings. Just as one becomes lost in the shadows of evil, one becomes blinded by the brilliance of the good (cf. *Republic* VII, *Sophist* 254a). From our ordinary human standpoint, however, to be good or evil is in the first place to be a good or evil human being, by virtue of the sort of life one is living as a certain sort of person with a certain sort of character. In the case of both good and evil an abstraction is necessarily performed by taking them up into thought and speech, seeking an analytical articulation of them, because both are primarily, for us, features of human life. Not by accident do Platonic dialogues always begin from and return to the lives of certain human beings in certain contexts who meet together for a time to converse with one another. Platonic philosophy begins and ends as a reflection on our lives and nature as human beings. Nevertheless, human beings do not exist cut off from the cosmos and reality in which they find their being; reflection on its nature is of a piece with reflection on our nature. Metaphysical investigation for Plato is of a piece with the investigation of ourselves and our lives, and so with the investigation of the good life. So long as one remembers that metaphysical speculation must emerge from and be reapplied to the human context, it is not only a permissible, but indeed a necessary part of philosophy.

Keeping this in mind, we should not find it surprising that a pre-Christian philosopher like Plato is aware of the existence of evil, for the phenomenon we call evil is a feature of our life and world, nor that he should explore the interrelation of good and evil metaphysically as a way of trying to make sense of our goodness and badness as creatures within a larger cosmos. As I hope I have shown, the result of his investigation is a conception of evil that in many respects is compatible with later, Christian notions. Just as, in Christian theology, the figure of Satan represents

⁴⁰On this point, see my "Comedy, Malice, and Philosophy," particularly section IV.

negatively rebellion against the source of being and goodness and positively the worship of oneself, even as his own creation by God indicates his subordination to that source and the derivative status of evil, so in the *Philebus* Plato represents evil on the moral level by the rebellious self-orientation of extreme hedonism and on the metaphysical level by the subordinate and dependent status of the unlimited.⁴¹ Plato captures the subversive and destructive potential of evil with his proposed fifth *genos*, even as he indicates its indeterminacy and self-destructiveness when taken as absolute through his account of the unlimited. His analysis accounts on a metaphysical level for both the possibility and the result of incorporating the power of evil into one's own life: it is a self-negating possibility, literally, for the more fully it is incorporated, the more fully the nature and value of oneself, one's existence as a human being, becomes degraded and destroyed. But once again, whether Plato is right or not can only be finally established in the arena of life itself. Is it "evil" to live *Philebus's* life? Is it "good" to live *Socrates's*? These remain but words, concepts subject to arbitrary definition and dispute, so long as the matter remains merely academic. These are realities which must be experienced to be known, and to experience them fully one must pursue them without reservation.⁴² The good, in short, must be lived to be understood, and as such it becomes its own justification.

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⁴¹Of course, the unlimited is not *created* by the cause; to the contrary, the unlimited is necessary for the creative activity of the cause. This difference is theologically important, and deserves further exploration in another space, but it does not in any case mean that evil and good are equiprimordial, as the above reflections have shown.

⁴²Plato does not of course advise us to undertake this pursuit in the case of evil, for to "learn" the nature of evil in its complete, existential sense is to risk one's own ruin (cf. *Rep.* 409a–d); but to pursue the good is to gain the good, so far as is possible for human beings, and it is this pursuit that he invites us to undertake as a lifelong commitment.